

PROMOTING OF AGROTOURISM ON THE INTERNET – A LESSON FROM THE VISEGRAD GROUP COUNTRIES

Karol Król✉

University of Agriculture in Krakow, Poland

Abstract. Research results of chosen aspects of agrotourism promotion on the Internet in Visegrad Group countries are presented in this paper. Surveys were performed in three stages. In the first stage, visibility of agrotouristic farms websites in search results was examined. In the second stage, an attempt was made to measure to what extent websites of agrotouristic farms “reach the recipients”. And in the third stage, selected aspects of their usage techniques were tested. The surveys show that farms from Visegrad Group countries, which carry out rural agrotourism and make attempts to find customers via the Internet, lose the race on the Web with entities from the IT field. Such entities provide big business portals that accumulate various accommodation offers. They are the ones with the help that makes it possible to find recreation offers in the countryside in a simple and quick way. Some recommendations resulting from the performed surveys is merging farms into organised groups, associations and clusters and promoting on the Internet. Websites that present unique content and a greater number of offers have a greater opportunity to be ranked high in search results. This, in turn, can result in the number of displays of a website and in use of lodgings. Therefore, decisions about a competitive advantage can be made.

Keywords: agrotourism, promotion of agrotourism, internet marketing, quality of website

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INTRODUCTION

The Visegrad Group (also called the Visegrad Four or V4) was created in 1991 as an informal, deprived of any institutional backup alliance of three central and eastern European countries: Poland, Czechoslovakia and Hungary. Its main purpose was to tighten wide-ranging cooperation among the countries of the group. This was changed after the division of Czechoslovakia and now includes: Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary (Gałaś et al., 2015).

The Visegrad Group is an exceptional form of regional cooperation which results not only from geographical neighbourhood of its members but also from the fact that Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary have always been a part of some community with the same civilizational and cultural roots (Törő et al., 2014).

Cooperation of the Visegrad Four depends on, among other things, development in the areas of environment protection, infrastructure, transport and energy industry as well as foreign policy. Equally important, in recent years it has become a cooperation in the range of broad tourism which due to the migration crisis in the countries of Western Europe has gained importance.

Tourists from Western Europe as well as from North America and other parts of the world look more often

✉ dr inż. Karol Król, Department of Spatial Economy and Landscape Architecture, University of Agriculture in Krakow, Mickiewicza Avenue 24/28, 30-059 Kraków, Poland, e-mail: k.krol@onet.com.pl

for offers of agrotourism (Konečný, 2014). In the countries of the Visegrad Group such forms of recreation develop currently in the direction of alternative tourism which is eco-friendly and uses cultural heritage values and natural diversity. Agritourism is also developing in these countries with regards to the quality of provided services offered and the capacity of available accommodation. Its further development may depend on, among other things, expenditures for international promotion, particularly on the Internet.

The aim of this paper is to analyse the visibility level of websites of agrotouristic farms of the Visegrad Group countries for tourists who search for the offers on the Internet. Additionally, other purposes being to measure to what extent these websites “reach the recipient” and also to evaluate the selected aspects of the technique of their completion.

Agrotourism in the V4 countries and its promotion in the Internet

Over last several years, rural areas of the Visegrad Group countries experienced significant socio-economic transformations. Non-agricultural economic activity has increased in importance. It is connected with multifunctional development, activation of rural residents as well as increase of economic diversity. Multifunctional development of rural areas is related to diversification of rural economies. It assumes moving away from mono-functional development based only on agricultural raw materials for non-agricultural economic activity including the tourism (Buday et al., 2009).

In the countries of the Visegrad Group, agrotourism is not a new phenomenon. Farms of Poland, Slovakia, Czech Republic and Hungary have considerable experience in providing touristic services though their forms and ranges are constantly evolving (Jarábková, 2010). In spite of that, development of agritourism still encounters a range of obstacles (Šimková, 2007). One of them is insufficient promotion of rural areas and tourism organisations entities which work in these regions.

The pace of agrotourism development depends to a large extent on marketing activities. Contemporary, competitive services marketing pressures economic entities to take promotional actions; without which even the most attractive offers cannot reach potential customers. Therefore, the importance of the Internet increases in promotion of agrotouristic services. It results from, among other things, accessibility and development of

modern facilities as well as information and communication technologies (ICT) which enabled buyers of touristic services to look for offers on the Internet (Buhalis and Law, 2008; Xiang and Gretzel, 2010).

The impact of informative technologies on presentation and promotion on the Internet

Informative technologies are the basic source of success in the era of informative community (Hennyeyová and Depeš, 2010). Over the last several years, the significance of the Internet and search engines has increased continuously. More and more users look for information online (Lazer et al., 2014), leading to online marketing in search engines (search engine marketing, SEM) developing dynamically (Paraskevas et al., 2011). So, presence or visibility in search results become a major concern, also among entities providing touristic services (Pan, 2015; Shih et al., 2013; Xiang et al., 2008).

Marketing in search engines is a form of internet marketing which uses computer techniques and tools in order to achieve the highest possible place of the website address in organic search results. This place is a specific recommendation and impacts visibility of the given content for customers. They, in turn, concentrate most often on the first chart of search results. Therefore, search engine ranks can influence customers’ buying decisions (Epstein and Robertson, 2015).

Every year search engines introduce updates in their algorithms responsible for accuracy of search results to better match users’ questions (Multazam and Purnama, 2015). There are many elements that determine the place in which the website address is displayed and the list of these elements is not revealed (Killoran, 2013). However, technological changes have key importance in this process and particularly those connected with performing websites in RWD (Responsive Web Design) technology i.e. their adaptation to mobile devices. RWD technology presumes fluent rating of service content with keeping the image quality as well as navigation simplicity (Baturay and Birtane, 2013). Well-formed website code is composed accordingly to opticruise display. Guidelines in that range are prepared by World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), the international organization that associated over 400 entities from around the world including corporations and scientific units (Vaughan-Nichols, 2010). Progressive technological changes also caused that customers’ requirements with respect to transfer quality and form

increased significantly. This also concerns websites of agrotouristic farms which should be created to the project standards both in terms of performance techniques but also number and range of provided functionalities and usability (Wang and Fesenmaier, 2012).

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The surveys were carried out in three stages (Table 1). In the first stage, the visibility of individual offers (websites) of agrotouristic farms for customers in search results was tested. In the second stage, an attempt was made to measure to what extent these websites “reach the recipient” on the basis of the analysis of selected usage statistics. In the last stage, an attempt was made to characterize selected aspects of performance techniques of these websites.

Determining websites’ visibility in search results (I stage)

Results that respond to given keywords are usually presented by search engines in two lists – the “organic” and “sponsored” results. The list of “organic” results is generated on the basis of databases created by Web crawlers that catalogue millions of websites according to accepted algorithms (Jerath et al., 2014). The sponsored list results from cooperation of search engines and advertisers.

In research of websites’ visibility, the attention was focused on organic results presented by the Google search engine after writing down keywords. Key phrases were built in the native language of the country where the offers were searched (Table 2).

Searching was performed from the point of view of a tourist who looks for agrotourism offers in the Internet

Table 1. Stages of surveys of internet agritourism promotion in the Visegrad Group countries

	Purpose of survey	Survey method	Survey tools
Stage I	Determining of websites visibility in search results	Search results analysis Google SERP	Table of websites classification according to accepted taxonomy
Stage II	Determining to what extent websites reach customers	Synthetic measurement and analysis of selected websites usage statistics	Web application SimilarWeb
Stage III	Characteristics of performance technique for the websites	Synthetic measurement and analysis of selected quality limits	Web applications – Mobile-Friendly Test – Websppeed – The W3C Markup Validation Service

Source: own elaboration.

Table 2. Key phrases used to search websites of agrotouristic farms in the Internet

No.	Phrases in Polish	No.	Phrases in Slovak
1	agroturystyka Pieniny	1	farmy a ranče agroturistika Nitra
2	agroturystyka Szczawnica	2	agroturistika ubytovanie Orava
3	agroturystyka Mazury	3	agroturistika Košice
4	agroturystyka Karpaty	4	agroturistika farma severný Spiš
5	agroturystyka Bieszczady	5	agroturizmus Liptov
No.	Phrases in Czech	No.	Phrases in Hungarian
1	farmy a ranče v regionu Karlovy Vary	1	vendégház, falusi vendéglátás Egerben
2	agroturistika v Krkonoše	2	falusi szállás a Tokaj-Hegyalja
3	agroturistiky v Mariánské Lázně	3	agroturizmus Balaton
4	agroturistické farmy Morava	4	falusi turizmus a Miskolctapolca
5	ubytování na farmě Plzeňský kraj	5	vendégház, falusi vendéglátás Esztergom

Source: own elaboration.

Table 3. Categories to which websites found in search results were assigned

Cat-egory	Description of category
A	Individual websites of agrotouristic farms
B	Blog
E	Web page with error or lack of web page
F	Internet forum
H	Web page of a hotel or the other entity that offers accommodation connected with a wide range of services, e.g. spa
I	The other websites, e.g. informational ones that relate to pedestrian or mountain tourism, internet articles, files of diploma papers, leaflets, reports and the other ones
K	Internet catalogues that group websites according to subject matter
M	Internet map
P	Tourist portal with search engine of offers that groups various offers of accommodation
S	Website of agrotouristic association of touristic organization that promotes local tourist attraction

Source: own elaboration.

in five selected popular touristic regions of every V4 country. Searches were performed between 9 to 15 January 2017, analyzing every query of the first five pages of search results of Google SERP (Search Engine Results Page), with 10 internet addresses presented by every card. The sponsored results were ignored in the analysis. Altogether, a thousand websites were analysed in terms of search results which were classified according to the accepted taxonomy (Table 3).

Determining to what extent websites of agrotouristic farms reach the recipient (II stage)

It was assumed in the surveys that the extent to which websites of agrotouristic farms “reach the recipient” can be expressed by means of basic measures of website’s use i.e. the number of displays, mean time spent by a user in the website and an average number of browsed pages. These are traditional (basic) measures which give some general opinion on the website’s efficiency

(Palmer, 2002). The extent to which the website reaches the recipient is understood as its specific range of impact or the extent to which it fulfils its basic functions – informative and marketing ones. It arises among others from website’s visibility in search results.

Several adopted measures were acquired by the SimilarWeb application which is provided free of charge in the form of search engine’s extension. Data is presented from the period of last 6 months preceding the month of measurement. Websites’ surveys were carried out between 16 to 23 January 2017 which allowed to obtain statistics of websites’ usage from the period from July to December 2016.

Altogether, the usage analysis was performed for 400 websites of agrotouristic farms, the addresses of which were acquired from 9 to 15 January 2017. It was assumed that the size of the sample will be sufficient to illustrate some regularities and reasoning. Addresses of Slovak farms were gained from the catalogue of websites – “Zoznam” (zoznam.sk), from the portal “Slovakia.travel” (in Slovak: Národný portál cestovného ruchu Slovenska) as well as from minor website catalogues. Addresses of Polish farms were obtained from the internet catalogue “Onet” (katalog.onet.pl) and the Czech ones from the catalogue “info-turistika.cz”. Addresses of Hungarian websites were completed from the catalogue of the touristic association “fatosz.eu” (in Hungarian: Falusi és Agroturizmus Országos Szövetsége).

Characteristics of the technique of performing websites of agrotouristic farms (III stage)

Characteristics of the technique of performing agrotouristic farms’ websites was prepared on the basis of diagnostics of selected technical parameters of websites’ accordance with project standards – their adaptation to mobile devices (RWD) was tested, the attempt to identify the system of content management (CMS) was made, the number of syntax errors of the code (validation W3C) as well as declaration of a document of such type (DTD) were recorded. The surveys were carried out with use of web applications which test websites in a search engine’s window (Table 4).

Responsiveness of websites was tested with use of “Mobile-Friendly Test” application provided by Google. Accordance of websites with coding standards and declaration of a document’s type were verified by means of “The W3C Markup Validation Service”, the

Table 4. Technical parameters of websites identified during tests of websites' quality

Parameter		Description of a parameter	Testing application
RWD		Adaptation of website to presentation on screens of mobile devices	Google Mobile-Friendly Test
CMS		The way of managing of website's content	Webspeed
W3C syntax correctness (validity)	HTML	Technical correctness of a website in the range of HTML code syntax according to W3C guidelines	The W3C Markup Validation Service
	CSS	Technical correctness of a website in the range of CSS code syntax according to W3C guidelines	
	Doctype	Declaration of a document's type (DTD – document type declaration)	

Source: own elaboration.

application recommended by W3C. Identification of content management system was supported by “Webspeed” application which tests selected technical parameters of websites.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Websites' visibility in search results (I stage)

In search results, 145 websites of agrotouristic farms were recorded which constituted 14.5% of analysed websites (Table 5). It is questionable how many websites were qualified as “other”, particularly in case of searching performed with use of key phrases in Slovak which were in the amount of 114 out of 250. Altogether, in the set of analysed websites, there were 258 recorded addresses which led to different network resources including various files that contained keywords accepted in the survey.

In the search results, there were most of all touristic portals grouping leisure offers – and 499 were identified, most of them in Poland and Hungary. Likewise, the number of websites catalogues most often recorded in the results obtained by means of key phrases in Slovak (25 times altogether) draws attention. Also, 16 websites of entities that are various organizations or agrotouristic associations which promote local touristic attractions and accommodation were found in search results.

Searching for agrotourism offers performed on the basis of phrases in Slovak was the least successful. Thus, indicating it is the least recorded number of websites of agrotouristic farms and the biggest number of

the “other” websites found in search results. Searching for agrotouristic offers based on Polish phrases was the most successful (Table 5).

The important aspect of agrotouristic farms' websites visibility on the Internet is their place in search results. The surveys reveal that in the case of the offers tracked by means of phrases in Polish language, 10 websites of agrotouristic farms were available within the first five

Table 5. The kind of websites recorded in Google search results according to the accepted taxonomy

Category	Poland	Slovakia	Czech Republic	Hungary	Total	%
A	70	21	27	27	145	14.5
B	2	0	0	2	4	0.4
E	2	3	2	1	8	0.8
F	5	0	0	0	5	0.5
H	0	0	8	18	26	2.6
I	17	114	71	56	258	25.8
K	0	25	10	2	37	3.7
M	1	0	0	1	2	0.2
P	149	85	125	140	499	49.9
S	4	2	7	3	16	1.6
Total	250	250	250	250	1000	100

Source: own elaboration.

Table 6. The websites of agrotouristic farms and portals that group the offers of accommodation in the structure of the first five cards of Google search results

Kind of website	Poland	Slovakia	Czech Rep.	Hungary	Total	In percent
Agrotouristic farms' websites	10	3	4	8	25	12.5
Portals that group accommodation offers	32	24	29	32	117	58.5
Other	8	23	17	10	58	29

Source: own elaboration.

cards of Google search results which are the most significant for the users. There were only 3 Slovak websites in this part of ranking, and 4 and 8 for Czech Republic and Hungary, respectively. Altogether, only 25 places out of 200 leading positions (12.5%) were occupied in search results by websites of agrotouristic farms. At the same time, 117 places (58.5%) were taken by portals that group accommodation offers (Table 6).

Visibility of websites in search results, and not only of agrotouristic farms but also websites in general, is a complex phenomenon. It is the result of many factors which in principle can be qualified to one of four disciplines: technique of performance, quality of presented content, expenditures for promotion as well as interactivity, usefulness and functionality of a website. In the subject area of website's preparing technique, there are such aspects as syntactic correctness of a code and responsivity. Content quality depends most of all on its uniqueness, currency, naturalness and moderation as well as multimodality and popularity. Simplifying, a website's promotion can be introduced through campaigns on social media and through cooperation with other websites (links' exchange). And interactivity, in the case of agrotouristic farms' websites, may offer the option to leave a comment, make a reservation, or even the possibility to send requests for offers. All these factors overlap each other and are interdependent and complementary. Altogether, they can decide on a high place in Google search results. This, in turn, can translate into the number of views of a website which can increase the interest of the offer and, consequently, lodgings' occupancy. So, it can establish a competitive advantage.

Websites of small agricultural farms from the countries of the Visegrad Group which carry out agrotouristic business, and try to attract customers by means of the Internet, often lose the race with big portals that group

various accommodation offers. These methods are now the quickest and simplest way to find offers of recreation in any country. On the other hand, the owners of agrotouristic farms can use high places of professional portals in search results and place their advertisements there. It will certainly improve visibility of such offers on the Internet. However, the advertisements should be thoughtfully distributed strategically placed in order to keep them complete and up to date.

Some recommendations which result from the performed surveys is merging farms in organised groups, associations and clusters (Abrahám, 2014) and then promoting themselves in the Internet. Internet websites of such entities can present more unique contents and a greater number of offers so that they have a greater opportunity to rank high in search results of the most popular search engines in the world. Nevertheless, it requires effort from local communities, hard work of leaders, and also knowledge and support from agricultural advisors.

But still, there are unanswered questions. To what extent is the visibility of agrotouristic farms' websites in search results a consequence of changes in search engines' algorithms, technique of performing websites, the quality of presented content and the scale of websites' promotion on the Internet? And how much of it depends on the form of question or choosing keywords?

To what extent websites of agrotouristic farms reach the recipients (II stage)

Statistics of using websites of agrotouristic farms were obtained in case of 185 websites from among 400 surveyed ones. So availability of statistics is relatively small and reaches about 46%. The smallest availability of statistics was noted for websites of agrotouristic farms in Hungary. It was only 28%.

Table 7. Selected statistics of using websites of agrotouristic farms from V4 countries

Country	Number of websites	Access to survey statistics (%)	Sum of displays	Total time spent on websites (min.)	Number of websites looked over in December 2016
Poland	100	54	402,87	129.19	219.12
Slovakia	100	52	460,90	118.08	225.10
Czech Rep.	100	51	470,08	181.21	251.98
Hungary	100	28	119,99	38.31	98.70
Total	400	46.25	1 453,85	466.79	794.90

Source: own elaboration.

In the period from July to December 2016, on the web pages with access to SimilarWeb statistics, almost 1.5 million of displays were noted. Moreover, in this period, according to SimilarWeb algorithm, users looked over almost 800 pages spending about 8 hours there. The users spent most of the time looking over the greatest number of pages in Czech agrotouristic farms' websites, according to SimilarWeb algorithm. Czech websites also enjoyed the greatest number of displays (Table 7).

Analysing usage statistics, specific "seasonality of displays" can be observed. The surveyed websites were attracting the greatest interest in summer months i.e. in July and August, and their number of displays was decreasing to the lowest values in December.

The displays' number of websites of agrotouristic farms measured by means of SimilarWeb application is relatively small. Even in case of doubling it i.e. accepting statistics access at the level of about 98%, it would be about 3 mln displays. By way of comparison, only one Czech website – www.estranky.cz that provides the service of automated websites creating, also used by owners of agrotouristic farms, was displayed in the time of the survey almost 13,5 mln times according to SimilarWeb algorithms. So, the small number of displays of agrotouristic farms' websites corresponds with their small visibility in search results.

Low access to statistics of farm websites from Hungary results in the general number of displays and the amount of the other statistics. The question that concerns interpretation of the collected results arises. Do they result from the low level of "penetration of resources of the Hungarian Internet" i.e. and can this result from limited efficiency of SimilarWeb application?

Or perhaps it is the effect of low interest in agrotourism in Hungary. Moreover, it is worth pointing out that small farms in Hungary often concentrate on wine production. Hence, the question about keywords' selection so that they would correspond with character of touristic business conducted in rural areas in the target country.

Efficiency of websites measured in such a way can also be determined as specific "range of impact". Although a website is potentially available for every user with network access, its range of impact is understood as visibility in search results – topic catalogues, offers' search engines or social networks and is limited. A common user is not aware of millions of websites' existence. Therefore, activities aimed at increasing websites' visibility in the Internet are required.

Quality of websites of agrotouristic farms (III stage)

Only 117 from surveyed websites (less than 30%) were performed in RWD technology. This number is close to the amount of websites in the case of which CMS content management system was identified (Table 8). These,

Table 8. Technology of performing websites of agrotouristic farms

	Poland	Slovakia	Czech Republic	Hungary	Total	%
RWD	36	28	19	34	117	29.25
CMS	34	22	30	44	130	32.50

Source: own elaboration.

in turn, are created in RWD technology as a standard. In the set of tested websites, WordPress (57), Joomla (39) and Drupal (12) systems were identified most often. It can be assumed that in case of the other websites content management is performed by means of files' exchange on the server.

Only 23 from among 400 tested websites were prepared without error in the range of syntax correctness of HTML code. In the case of as many as 356 websites, from 1 to 99 non-compliances with accepted W3C specification were noted. In turn, the validator revealed over a hundred of errors on 21 websites. It is slightly better in cascade sheets styles CSS where correct codes were noted in 107 cases. But the rest need optimization. Errors in HTML and CSS syntaxes should be eliminated allowing for websites to stay on the lower level in search results.

Changes to replace XHTML standard being enforced from 28 October 2014 with HTML5 standard which was then officially published as a recommendation of W3C can be noticed in the set of surveyed websites (Table 9). These performed in HTML5 specification and those in XHTML specification (most of all in XHTML 1.0 Transitional version) were recorded in the set of evaluated websites. Relatively a large number of websites prepared without DTD declaration and in the archaic HTML4 specification were also noted. Altogether, there were 82 such websites which was a little more than 20%.

The surveys show that accepting the specified HTML declaration in the website's heading is not equivalent with respecting by its authors coding principles which result from it. This, evidenced by numerous errors revealed during validation.. On the other hand, these errors can result

from improper managing of the content of the websites and the projects of which are usually transferred into the care of the owners of agrotouristic farms.

Presented measures have got technical, engineering, and project values. They can be helpful for SEO specialists serving as one of the parameters that characterise optimization level of a website for search engines.

CONCLUSIONS

Touristic potential of agrotouristic farms of the Visegrad Group countries is very promising, but these farms often have difficulties attracting tourists' awareness on a significant scale. Attractive pricing and high quality of services can be insufficient without wide-ranging promotional activities which should be conducted on the Internet as well.

Environments in which economic entities function, including agrotouristic farms, go through dynamic changes. Info-technologies that revolutionize the way of conducting business activity become increasingly important. A website is a business card in the virtual world. Its form can inspire confidence and translate directly into perception of professionalism and the quality of services of the entity it brands. It also concerns agrotouristic farms which are most often evaluated on the Internet. Previous practice that only includes passive presentation of an offer on the Internet has become insufficient. It requires changes in business model which include greater shares of new technologies in promotion, communication with customers, and also in reservation and sale services from the owners of agrotouristic farms who want to expand their business.

Quality changes in the range of building search results rankings cause not-updated websites prepared improperly from the technical standpoint, poor in contents, not supported in social media, or promoted by means of unfair practices will be transferred to further places of search results. All of which can be a challenge for owners of agrotouristic farms who promote their services on the Internet. It will require from them more activity, engagement, knowledge, and skills than before. Without optimization and promotion, websites of agrotouristic farms can become invisible for tourists which is why their role in promoting services and products will be minimal or none.

Little farms from the Visegrad Group countries that conduct touristic business often struggle with lack

Table 9. Specifications in which websites of agrotouristic farms were prepared (generalization)

HTML Specification	Poland	Slovakia	Czech Republic	Hungary	Total	%
Lack of determined specification	10	11	5	6	32	8
HTML 4	10	13	19	8	50	12.50
XHTML	38	33	43	41	155	38.75
HTML 5	42	43	33	45	163	40.75

Source: own elaboration.

of knowledge and funds. These issues can be understandable or even obvious for people connected with internet marketing, however, their interpretation can be difficult for farmers. It is worth pointing out that many owners of agrotouristic farms use or will be using services of firms specialised in creating websites. They can be instructed by education and consulting services about what they should expect and which requirements should be fulfilled by a website to realize its function. Moreover, this knowledge is essential for making use of the advantages of the Internet effectively and completely.

It is difficult to demand from the owners of agrotouristic farms programming skills or knowledge on global standards, as well as project accuracy or scrupulousness. However, they can be educated and informed on the advantages of the visibility of a website and how its usability play a crucial role that directly influence the number of customers obtained via the Internet.

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